

**Foundational Stories Series**  
**Sacred Spaces**  
**Sermon on Genesis 1-2:4 (7/6/14; first sermon at McCabe UMC)**  
**Jennifer M. Hallenbeck**

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So...this is a little nerve-wracking, right? A new pastor standing up here to preach in this place – a place that’s very familiar to most of you, but not-so-familiar to the preacher...

*“I wonder what she’s going to say...”*

*“I hope she’s not boring...”*

*“Do you think she’ll fit in here?”*

*“Will she like it here?”*

*“Will we like her? Will she like us?”*

*“I hear she’s a vegetarian – that’s kind of weird.”*

*“How old is she, anyway? She looks pretty young...”*

Well, in case any of those thoughts are going through your minds, let me assure you that many of those same thoughts have gone through *my* mind as well. And, just so you know, I turn 36 next month. ☺

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My cat and I pulled into Bismarck a week ago Tuesday night, moving truck with all of my stuff arrived late the next morning, and my parents drove in from Sioux Falls – with their dog *and* mine – right around supper time that night...just in time to help me unpack my kitchen!

Since I got to town, I've unpacked my kitchen (and many other rooms full of boxes), I toured around town a bit, I've been to Target too many times to mention, I mowed the parsonage lawn – the first time I have *ever* mowed a lawn...for real, I'm not lying about that.

I met with a couple about a wedding, I met with a family about a baptism, I worshiped with you four times last weekend, I ate delicious food at the welcome potluck you hosted, I began the process of setting up my office here at the church, I've gotten to know our wonderful staff members a bit, I popped into youth group this past Wednesday evening to say “hi”...and, of course, I've seriously begun reflecting on what God is up to here at McCabe, as well as what God might be calling us to from here on out.

So far, Bismarck and McCabe have been great and you all have been wonderful to me in this time of transition. I have felt sufficiently welcomed and it's great to know that there is mutual excitement about my appointment to be your pastor.

And, please know, I have been warned that summer worship attendance is a bit lower than during the school year. I don't take it personally. I am the daughter of two teachers, so, when I was growing-up, we had a good two-and-a-half months every

summer to drive around the country visiting family and being tourists...and during that time, we weren't in church on Sunday very often.

Truly, I do understand there are lake places and campgrounds and vacation destinations that are sacred spaces – especially in the summer – and that those sacred spaces sometimes keep you away from this place. I understand that...because sacred spaces are important to us in this life, right? //

Sacred spaces: you know, those places you go back to, time and time again, because, in those spaces, you find peace and comfort – you find a kind of familiarity and grace...through that space, you make an important connection to a part of yourself or a part of your past that you never want to forget. The places that serve that function for you are your sacred spaces.

One of my family's sacred spaces is a little lake in west-central Michigan called Gifford Lake. My parents own a chunk of property on this lake that's part of a piece of property that was in my dad's family for generations. Every summer of my childhood we would make a pilgrimage to this lake, spending lazy days splashing around or just relaxing on the cottage porch.

It's a place of wonderful family memories and I hope to have children of my own someday or, if not children, nieces and nephews, with whom I can share that sacred family space. //

As sacred as that lake is, though, in many ways, one of the most sacred family spaces for me is the Hallenbeck family kitchen table in Sioux Falls.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, except for rare occasions, my family would eat at least one meal a day together around that table – usually the evening meal. As I mentioned, my parents are both teachers, so all four of us would talk about our days at school, then we'd perhaps delve into politics or religion or the state of the world in general...surely with some humor and possibly a bit of argument.

That table is a place of conversation and closeness for me – and, in my family, the time we spend around it is very, very sacred. I imagine the same is true for many of you here today.

Another space that was sacred to me as a child and adolescent was The Orpheum Theater in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Growing-up I was never too much of an athlete, but I loved being on stage.

Though some people have a hard time believing this, I am a natural introvert...but when I performed – either acting or singing – that natural shyness would sort of disappear. I was rarely a main character onstage, but I loved being there and I spent a lot of time in

elementary and middle school participating in youth community theater at the Orpheum. //

Now, as a pastor, of course, the *churches* I've been part of have all become sacred spaces for me. I was born – and baptized – in suburban Detroit...but the first church I remember as a sacred space was First United Methodist Church in Sioux Falls.

One set of my grandparents was there every Sunday, I had friends of all ages in that church, I sang in choirs there from the time I was probably about four-years-old all the way through my first year of college, and I felt my call to pastoral ministry through that congregation. The spaces around and within that place are definitely sacred for me.

However, First United Methodist Church in Sioux Falls hasn't been my primary worshiping community for nearly 15 years. After graduating from Augustana College in Sioux Falls in 2000, I went on to seminary at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in the Chicago area.

While I was there, the seminary chapel community was sacred to me...and then there were two congregations I worked in part-time my second and third years of seminary – and, of course both of those churches became sacred spaces.

My first full-time pastoral appointment in the Dakotas was to the United Methodist Churches in Alexandria and Ethan, South Dakota. So, for three years, *those* two churches were sacred spaces in my life.

Then, for five years, I was the associate pastor at First United Methodist Church in Pierre, South Dakota...so *that* became a sacred space for me.

And, for the last three years, Evergreen United Methodist Church in Wahpeton was one of my sacred spaces. From July of 2011 until two Sundays ago, the staff, the members, and the friends of Wahpeton Evergreen United Methodist Church nurtured and challenged me as a pastor and as a person.

I grew a lot in the last three years and I will be forever grateful to them for their part in helping me to become the pastor I am today. I still have a lot to learn – as a pastor, for sure, but also as a follower of Jesus Christ. And, I must tell you that I am so excited to grow with you all in the years to come.

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This particular holiday weekend, as I talk about “sacred spaces,” I would be remiss if I did not mention some of the sacred spaces of our nation.

In the past eleven years, I've had the privilege of being an adult leader on our Dakotas Conference youth trip to New York City and Washington, DC; the last time I went on this

trip was last summer...so we got to see first-hand some of our nation's most sacred spaces.

In New York City, on that trip, we see the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island – sacred spaces for us and for the world, signaling freedom and welcome.

On that trip, while in New York City we also walk around the World Trade Center Site. I've been to the World Trade Center site many times since September 11, 2001, and I've had the privilege of seeing it go from a site of tragic destruction and terrorism, to a place of new life and hope.

Then, while in Washington, DC, on that same trip, we do a walking tour of the monuments and memorials – encountering many sacred spaces along the way: the World War II Memorial, the Korean War Memorial, and, of course, the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial – which hits a bit more close to home for me and my family because Vietnam was the war of my parents' generation. My dad got drafted in the early 70's and my parents spent their first married years living on an Air Force base in southern Illinois.

Unlike so many Vietnam Vets, my dad never saw combat – never left this country – but the air they breathed back then was saturated with that war. I grew-up hearing stories about their life on the base...stories that included instances of targeted vandalism to their property simply because my dad was in the military during such a controversial war.

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The last time I went on that Conference youth trip to New York and DC was over a year ago. Since then, things have changed quite a lot for me...and, as I stand up here, it's surely quite clear that things are changing for all of you, too. Pastors retire...new pastors come...change is in the air.

But, in the midst of change, some things *do* remain constant: things like the steadfast presence and the faithfulness of our God. And part of what makes our sacred spaces *sacred* is that they remind us of just that: our sacred spaces remind us of God's presence through it all.

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Today's Scripture reading is one of my absolute favorites in the Bible...and, especially because it's a bit lengthy, I'm so grateful to all those who will have read it during this weekend's worship services.

As I get started preaching here at McCabe, I'm going to spend July and August preaching on some of the earliest stories in the Bible – some of our “foundational stories,” if you will. And it doesn't get much more foundational than the Creation story of Genesis chapter 1!

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A while back, I began slowly reading through a little book by a woman named Marva Dawn. The book is called *In the Beginning, God* and it centers around the Creation account in Genesis chapter 1 – this amazing story about how God *spoke* the universe into being.

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When reading the Bible – when reading Scripture – it is often our natural tendency to read the words on the page, and then to ask what the holy words say about *us*: “What do these words mean for *my* life?”

In the first chapter of her book, Marva Dawn says, “We can too naturally tend toward asking what the Bible says and means for our benefit instead of what it says about God, and how its purpose ultimately is to draw us into worship.”<sup>1</sup>

I love that. And it offers a HUGE challenge for me because, perhaps like some of you, I can be a little selfish sometimes...wanting to know “what’s in it for me” – even when it comes to reading the Bible. So I do, in fact, find myself reading the holy words of Scripture and then thinking first about *me*.

But, in her book, Marva Dawn reminds us that – right from the start of the Bible – it is made clear to us that the words of this holy book, first and foremost, are meant to tell us about *God*. And in this beautiful account of the Creation, we learn just how amazing God actually is.

At the close of her first chapter, Marva Dawn writes this: “What a great gift it is to us to notice [in the creation account] all the ways that God created, said, saw, separated, called, made, set, blessed, finished, rested, hallowed! How can we not but praise our magnificent Creator for all His works?”<sup>2</sup>

*“What a great gift it is to us to notice all the ways that God created, said, saw, separated, called, made, set, blessed, finished, rested, hallowed! How can we not but praise our magnificent Creator for all His works?”*

And how true...right? Right off the bat, in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible, we are taught about everything our God is capable of: that our God is capable of making *all* of this – all of everything we see. God did it and it belongs to God. And, by that, we are taught just how sacred *all* of this space truly is.

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Indeed, all of God's world is sacred and, as we experience the earth and skies and the rivers, and as we grow in love for one another, we are called to lift our eyes to the One who made it all. This world is God's sacred space...and within it, we are called to care

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1 Dawn, Marva. *In the Beginning, God*. 11.

2 Ibid. 14.

for it and to love it.

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So, through this sermon, you've now learned about many of the sacred spaces in my life...as I shared, I hope your own "sacred spaces" came to mind. We've also been reminded of some of the sacred spaces of our nation – an appropriate reminder on this Independence Day weekend.

But, there is one sacred space that also deserves a mention today... and, of course, that is *this* sacred space: McCabe United Methodist Church.

I certainly do not want to go overboard talking about how McCabe is my mom's home church and about how my mom's family loved McCabe so much when they lived in Bismarck from the mid-1940's to the early 1960's.

But, like many of you here today, *this* place has been a sacred space for my family for decades and I love the fact that I now get to work in and through this place.

In fact, on a couple of occasions this past week, I was a bit overwhelmed by the beauty of our sanctuary: you know how it is when the lights are off inside, but the light *outside* comes in through the stained glass *just right* and the empty pews are decorated with bits of blue and green, red and gold. It is truly awe-inspiring.

And, of course, there is the large, *clear*-glass window with it's amazing view of the Capitol building. It's a gorgeous view – and my favorite part about it is that, no matter how you look out the big window, you cannot avoid the cross. It's a reminder that, as people of Christian faith, we *never* interpret what happens in government without first thinking about the God we know in Jesus Christ...a God of compassion, of sacrifice and challenge, a God of mercy and new life. //

Nearly everything about this sacred place points us to the majesty of God. And *in* this sacred space – week after week – we are invited to worship that same majestic God...the God who gave us life...the God who gave us this wonderful world...the God who, according to Genesis chapter one, *spoke* the universe into being. //

In this sacred space we sing praises to God, we hear God's word read and preached, we pray to God...and then we are sent from *this* sacred space into the world to be in service to the God who made it all.

This sacred space is meant to remind us that *everything* – everything in our own lives and everything in this world – is, first and foremost, about the God who made it all.

Like McCabe's vision statement reminds us, we believe God in Jesus Christ calls us to

worship...we believe that, through worship, we are inspired to grow in our faith...and we believe that, in the midst of that growth, we will serve God's people in various ways.

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The life of Christian faith may not always be a linear, three-step process: worship first, then growth, then service. Whether or not we end up doing things in that particular order, all three are crucial – worship, growth, and service...but the heart of it all is worship, because worship is about directing our very selves toward our Creator God.

And, in all sincerity, I must tell you I am so excited to worship God with you all in the weeks, months, and years to come. Amen.